

Stalingrad

Antony Beevor

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'Der Manstein Kommt!'

Snow began to fall heavily at the end of the first week of December. Drifts filled *balkas*, forcing those who lived in caves excavated from their sides to dig their way out. There was little fuel for any vehicles, and the horses pulling ration carts were so starved that their strength had to be spared on the smallest hills. Chaplain Altmann of the 113th Infantry Division, after hitching a ride on one, recorded: 'I can't remain seated, because the horse is so ill-nourished that he cannot stand the slightest strain.'

Altmann was above all struck by the pathetic youth of soldiers in the regiment he was visiting. Their first question was utterly predictable: 'When are we going to get more to eat?' He also noted that although it was only the second week of December, 'already their wretched bunkers in the middle of this treeless steppe have Christmas decorations'. At battalion headquarters, he received a telephone call warning him of an unChristmas-like duty. 'Tomorrow morning at dawn, execution of a German soldier (nineteen-year-old, self-inflicted wound).'

Although all soldiers suffered badly from hunger, most still had no idea of the size of the supply problem facing the Sixth Army. Hitler, when ordering Paulus to stay in place, had promised that more than one hundred Junkers 52 transport aircraft would be delivering supplies, yet during the air-bridge's first week of operations from 23 November the airlift did not even average thirty flights a day.

Twenty-two transport planes were lost through enemy action and crashes on 24 November, and another nine were shot down the following day. Heinkel 111s had to be taken off bombing missions in a desperate attempt to make up the losses. Richthofen rang Jeschonnek three times in an attempt to convince him that they lacked the aircraft to supply the Sixth Army by air. Goering could not be contacted. He had left for Paris.

The airlift did not provide anything like the bare minimum of 300 tons a day promised. Just 350 tons arrived during the course of the whole week. Out of this 350 tons, there were only 14 tons of food for a ration strength by then reduced to 275,000. Three-quarters of the total load consisted of fuel, of which part was for the Luftwaffe's own aircraft based at Pitomnik to protect the transport aircraft from Russian fighters. The Pitomnik-based Messerschmitts, however, were now facing fearsome odds as well as often appalling flying conditions. One captured pilot told his NKVD interrogator how, flying out of Pitomnik as escort, his Me-109 had been cut off and attacked by six Russian fighters.

In the second week up to 6 December, 512 tons (still less than a quarter of the minimum) arrived, delivered by an average of 44 transport aircraft a day. Only 24 tons were food supplies. More and more draught animals had to be slaughtered to make up the shortage. Soldiers saw their rations diminishing rapidly, but they convinced themselves that the situation would not last. They admired the bravery of the Luftwaffe crews and developed a great affection for 'Tante Ju' – the Junkers trimotors flying out wounded comrades and taking their letters home to Germany. 'I'm well and healthy,' they wrote in December, reassuring their families at home. 'Nothing worse can happen,' was another constant refrain. 'Don't be worried for me, I'll soon be home safe and sound.' They still hoped for a Christmas miracle.

Stalin, meanwhile, had been hoping for a second decisive blow, almost immediately after the encirclement of the Sixth Army. Operation Uranus had been seen at the *Stavka* as the first part of a master strategy. The second, and most ambitious phase, would be Operation

Saturn. This called for a sudden offensive by the armies of South-West and Voronezh Fronts, smashing through the Italian Eighth Army to advance south to Rostov. The idea was to cut off the rest of Army Group Don and trap the First Panzer and the Seventeenth Armies in the Caucasus.

Even before Sixth Army started to dig in on the steppe between the Don and the Volga, Vasilevsky had been discussing the next stage with the commanders of the South-West and Voronezh Fronts. He submitted his initial project to Stalin on the night of 26 November. The estimated start date for Saturn, allowing for redeployment and reinforcement, was 10 December. Stalin agreed, and told him to proceed. A more immediate preoccupation, however, had to be addressed first. This was the question of how Manstein would react to save the Sixth Army.

Stalin began to suffer from a characteristic bout of impatience. He wanted everything to happen at once – both Operation Saturn and the rapid destruction of the Sixth Army. He had already given orders for the 2nd Guards Army, the most powerful force in the Red Army, to deploy west of Stalingrad, ready for the attack on Rostov. But as Vasilevsky discovered in the first week of December, even with seven Soviet armies deployed against them, Paulus's divisions were going to be much more difficult to destroy than they had imagined.

On 28 November, Stalin asked Zhukov for an assessment of enemy intentions. Zhukov sent his report the next day. 'The trapped German forces are not likely to try to break out without help from a relief force from the direction of Nizhne-Chirskaya and Kotelnikovo,' he wrote. His predictions proved accurate, but a close study of the situation showed that this was the only practicable choice. After sending his answer to Stalin, Zhukov discussed the situation with Vasilevsky, who had now been told by Stalin to focus his attention entirely on the reduction of the Sixth Army. The two generals privately agreed that they would probably have to postpone Operation Saturn and instead consider an Operation Little Saturn. The plan would be to crash into the rear and left flank of Manstein's Army Group Don. This would bring any drive to relieve Stalingrad to an abrupt halt.

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